

COVID Escape Trip

By Bill Mitchell

Reading the account in *Das Herz von Dixie* of Fran and Scott Witt's transcontinental drive in their Macan S last year gave me the impetus to write down a narrative of my own road trip in the time of COVID, before the brain cells that contained those memories faded into oblivion. Alas, life (and procrastination) got in the way and nearly a year later I'm attempting to do so with the help of my travel notes that I thankfully saved. So here goes.

After being imprisoned at home for most of 2020, we, like almost everyone else in the developed world began to chafe at all the restrictions, and as things began to open up in the redder states, we discussed with some friends the idea of an epic road trip. I have traveled extensively in the American west and in particular the southwest, but had never visited Glacier N.P., so that was a must for the itinerary. Our traveling companions, Jerry and Rosie Bong of Huntsville, had not seen nearly as much but Jerry was originally from South Dakota so we put together an itinerary that included SD and Glacier, with several other interesting places thrown in for good measure. We decided September would be a good time to take the trip since school (if there was to be school) would be in session and the crowds would be much less, we hoped. (Boy, were we wrong!)

The vehicle of choice for this journey would be my trusty 2017 Porsche Cayenne with less than 40,000 miles on the odometer as neither of our sedans could carry everything, and my Cayman was obviously not up to the task, although I longed to take it on the trip. Jerry planned out most of the SD portion and I filled in the Montana part, throwing in Idaho just for the heck of it, and we agreed that Yellowstone and the Tetons should also be included. We wanted to be a bit flexible, but with pandemic uncertainties, we felt it best to have lodging reservations in place to avoid unpleasant consequences with closed or full hotels and such.

I consulted a good friend who had just returned from a family trip to Colorado and picked his brain for things such as how hotels were functioning, finding restaurants that were open to the public, and a myriad of other tidbits I felt we needed to arm ourselves with before launching off into the Great COVID Unknown.

So, with all these preparations in place, my wife Karen, Jerry, Rosie, and I loaded up and headed out early (for the girls 8 a.m. is early) on Monday, September 7, 2020. We had traveled from our home in Fort Payne to Huntsville on Sunday evening to stay with the Bongs and thus be 75 miles closer to our destination. We wished to travel as much as possible on the 'blue roads' and avoid interstates, but knew this would prove impossible due to the tremendous distances involved. We did, however, avoid them for the first leg of the journey, heading north out of Huntspatch into Tennessee, taking a series of roads leading through Fayetteville, Lawrenceburg, Jackson, and Dyersburg before taking I-155 into Missouri and I-55 up to St. Louis. We made it to Columbia, MO the first day to gain knowledge by staying in a Holiday Inn Express.

Day two was all interstate to Kansas City and then up I-29 to Sioux Falls, SD for the second night, gracing the Marriott Springhill Suites with our presence before setting off on Wednesday across the vast prairies of South Dakota. We had included a small cooler among our supplies and, except for the very first day, we utilized that to have roadside lunches in mostly scenic locations, which avoided contact with outsiders, cut our meal costs, and increased the travel time available. So far, we had seen some mildly interesting terrain, but no real tourist stops. That was about to change.

Day four was all I-90 with some stops. First up, Mitchell, SD and the famous Corn Palace. It was really quite amazing what all can be built/made/fashioned out of corn, and while this didn't rank very high on my favorites for the trip it was interesting and gave us an excuse to stop in my namesake town. The crowd, if you could call it that, was about six other people, partly because we hit it right after opening and partly because, well, I guess because it's corn(y). Back in the trusty Cayenne, it was off down I-90 for some mindless miles. I will admit, South Dakota is not as flat as I imagined, and since we weren't seeing it in the dead of winter it was pretty interesting scenery with rolling hills, river gorges, and as we approached Chamberlain, an enormous statue of a Native American woman. The sculpture is called "Dignity" and represents a Cheyenne woman on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River in traditional Plains-style dress. It's quite impressive and we stopped for a look-see. They had nice clean bathrooms, too.



Dignity, Chamberlain, SD

From there it was westward to the most touristy stop of the entire trip, and the least favorite of us all. The (in)famous Wall Drug in Wall, SD. I called it Gatlinburg West but that does a great disservice to Gatlinburg. At one time I guess it was quaint and interesting, but now it's a series of shops and stalls crammed together with the sole purpose of extracting as much money from the public as possible, while delivering the least possible goods and services. And the crowds, oh the crowds. We wore our masks most everywhere but the majority of folks at Wall Drug seem to never have heard of them, and social distancing was impossible if you entered any establishment. Needless to say, after getting a picture of the girls on the Jackalope we hustled on our way, feeling a bit creepy and totally taken.



Karen and Rosie and their Jackalope friend at Wall Drug

Next up was Badlands N.P. and an eye-opening experience. The badlands had never been very high on my list of places to visit, but after having done so I gained a better appreciation for the place, and while we only had a few hours to visit, it made an impression on me. The entire park is vast at 244,000 acres, and most tourists (us included) only see a very small portion of it. We had our first encounter with prairie dogs there, cute little critters, but I wouldn't want one for a pet. We also saw a bighorn sheep from a distance and lots of hills all jumbled together. There were quite a few bison (buffalo) scattered throughout the area. It really does look a bit otherworldly in appearance and is well worth a visit, I wish we had had more time, but we had reservations that evening in Rapid City, our base for the next two days.



Badlands N.P., South Dakota

However, on the way out of the park we decided to detour to visit another NPS site, the Minuteman Missile Complex almost directly across from the entrance to Badlands. We couldn't visit the silo where the nuclear missiles were once housed due to COVID, but the visitor center was open and we spent some time there reliving our 60's experiences with "duck and cover."



Mt. Rushmore, South Dakota

While staying in Rapid City we made the obligatory trip to Mt. Rushmore and were once again surprised by the number of visitors. I'm sure in a normal year in summer the crowds are much larger, but there were plenty of people there when we stopped by. It is impressive to say the least, but doesn't merit a very long visit. The Visitor Center was once again open and offered many interesting exhibits and facts on the history of the making of the monument and the man who envisioned it and brought it to fruition.

Leaving there we found the Crazy Horse Memorial but didn't go in as the line was long and the entrance fee high. We could see it from a distance and get the picture anyway. Next up was Custer State Park where we spent some time hiking and seeing our first snow of the trip, as it had been cold the week before we arrived and they got several inches. From a purely Porsche standpoint, the drive on the Needles Highway was the high point of this day, and I was wishing for my Cayman GTS instead of the still-capable Cayenne.



The Needles, from Needles highway

On the drive we viewed several pronghorn antelope and some wild burros as well as additional bison.

The next day we left our hotel early to make the short trip to Spearfish, SD. On the way we stopped in Sturgis since it was “on the way” and we were about the only people in town it seemed. Stores hadn’t opened but wouldn’t you know, before we could get out of town a souvenir shop opened up so the ladies could spend time and money there. We then stopped briefly in Deadwood but since it was so early the town was dead.

Two of the most interesting things we saw on the entire trip centered around Spearfish. First, there is a fish hatchery in the town that raises several species of trout, and they have a below-waterline viewing area that offered us a fisheye view of the delicious animals. The other really interesting place on the tour this day was the town of Lead (pronounced “leed”) where there once was a large open pit gold mine, and an even larger underground mine, diving over 8000 feet down. The mine today is operated jointly by Stanford University and the US government for research, and is only open to tours by appointment, which we did not have. However, there is a really nice museum downtown adjacent to the open pit mine which proved to be fascinating. Seems the

mine is used to shoot sub-atomic particles underground back and forth to the Fermi Lab in Chicago. Who knew? Big Bang fans will be overjoyed at all the geekiness there.



Open-pit mine, Lead, SD

The next morning, we would leave South Dakota and enter Wyoming to first visit Devil's Tower. But before we totally abandoned SD, we stopped in Belle Fourche (pronounced "Bell Foosh"). Why? Well, any good geography student would know that Belle Fourche is the geographic center of the United States. The large stone monument is in a little park right in the center of town, but it's really the false center, because the real one is in a farmer's field outside of town. We didn't take the time to find that one and decided the marker in town was close enough for government work.



Karen in the center of the United States

We thought surely such an out-of-the-way place as Devil's Tower would see sparse traffic on this September day, but boy, were we wrong. Throngs of folks had managed to find this place, most just to stare up at the volcanic plug but many to hike around it and a few hardy souls to climb the sucker. Cue the Close Encounters theme. There is also a rather large prairie dog town on the road leading to the tower, so don't go horseback riding there.



Devil's Tower, near Sheridan, WY

The heart of the trip for me was to visit Glacier National Park in Montana, hard up against the Canadian border. It's a long way from anywhere and as many times as I had traveled in the American West, I had never made it up there. Yellowstone, Zion, Arches, Grand Canyon, Yosemite, yes to all those gems but there never seemed to be enough time or the distance was too great to add Glacier to any of my previous treks. So this was my main goal, the prize I was holding out for, and, well, it was a bust. Remember the big fires last year in CA and OR? Well, they were in full blaze in September of 2020 and the smoke was drifting all the way to the east coast. We arrived in our base camp for Glacier, the little burg of Big Fork on the northeast shore of Flathead Lake not far from the park. We stayed in a themed hostelry, you know, one room like a French boudoir, one like an Arabian sheikh's harem, etc. The place was a bit shaky but our room was huge and served us well even though there was no TV. Our friends' room did have TV but we were on the move so much it was hardly missed. But back to the smoke. Arriving, we detected the distinct hint of wood smoke that would accompany us for the next few days as Oregon was apparently burning up and sending distress smoke signals to everyone. One had warning signs about the high winds and they weren't kidding. Our plates, napkins and some food items were blown into South Dakota that day. Next up—Yellowstone country and back to Wyoming.



One of our many roadside picnic stops.

I had rented a VRBO house in West Yellowstone for our time there, and it was a nice place on the outskirts of the tourist town with numerous warning signs inside and out to secure all foodstuffs and dispose of garbage in the bearproof containers, so we were diligent in doing so. After setting up housekeeping, we headed into town to find some dinner, and were once again confronted by large throngs of others intent on doing the same. The wait time at our chosen spot was around 45 minutes, sitting outside where we got to know some other visitors and compared notes from our travels thus far. Naturally, we found a group from Alabama so we could at least understand one another's conversation.

Early the next day we took off for the park to spend a long day trying to take in as much as possible of this gigantic gift to America. It really is an amazing place with so many geothermal features and its very own Grand Canyon (of the Yellowstone). Yellowstone

N.P. is actually a giant caldera (look it up) formed by a collapsing volcano and it sits right over a very active hot spot deep underground. All that heat is forever trying to get out and does in various places throughout the park. Some places we visited had few others vying for the best vantage point, but in others we were elbow-to-elbow and traffic would get congested, especially at intersections and where wildlife was present. Did I mention wildlife? In spades. Bison, OK, I'll just stoop to calling them Buffalo like everyone else, were ubiquitous in the park, and just like the bear jams in GSNP, wherever the traffic started backing up there was usually one of these scraggly creatures nearby. Once we were parked to read some interesting signage when a rather large fellow came lumbering around the bend, walking smack dab in the middle of the road, followed by, oh, about 200 cars and RV's. His park, his road, and by gum he'd move when he darn well pleased.



Buf in the road

In addition to the buffalo were elk, deer, more elk, a couple of wolves, still more elk, prairie dogs, and did I mention we saw a lot of elk?



Bull elk observing the tourists

The geothermal features were amazing and we ventured onto several of the trails to see some not visible from the road, marveling at the variety of colors created by the various lichen, moss, and bacteria that thrived in the superhot waters. It really is a unique place in all the world and I highly recommend it. At one of the parking lots for the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, I saw one of the first C8 Corvettes and snapped a picture for my friend who was home waiting for his allocation to come up. We saw many Macan and Cayenne iterations of our German steed but very few sports cars.



One of the first new C8 Corvettes I'd seen in the wild.

The smoke from the fires was still present, but not nearly as thick as it had been in Glacier, and most of our views were less long distance so it wasn't much of an imposition at Yellowstone. After a long day in the park, we retired to our house in W. Yellowstone for the evening only to return to the park the next morning before moving down to Grand Teton N.P. I have to mention that getting on the road early is a great advantage in avoiding the crowds since so many folks don't seem to stir until 9 or 10 a.m. I also have to mention that I am positive we saw every RV registered in the USA on this trip, they were everywhere in abundance.

We had been surprised by the large number of people at most of the places we had been thus far, but were floored by the vast hoards at Grand Teton N.P. I tried to find a parking spot for the first two visitors centers we encountered but cars were parked out on the road a good $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from the building, so we only stopped for pictures along the way until we got to Moose, where we were able to get close enough to a visitor center to park in a lot. In many of the parks we visited, the visitor centers were closed (Yellowstone was one) but the Park Service would always have an EZ-up out front with a couple of rangers to answer questions and stamp your passport. The Moose center has a big gift shop so it was open, no uniformity in their rules for open or closed it seemed,

but the dollar ruled. After an appropriate time for viewing and picture-taking, we went into Jackson for lunch and to take the obligatory photo in the town square under one of the elk antler archways.



Karen at the elk arch in Jackson.

Being a skier, as is Jerry, we had decided we were going to see Jackson Hole Ski Resort. We've never skied it as it's just too hard to get to when the Utah and Colorado resorts are so much more accessible. So, we took the time to drive into the next valley from Jackson to see it and buy a couple of stickers at one of the shops. Then we headed off into Idaho for one of those out-of-the-way adventures that sometimes prove inspired.

Of necessity, we stayed in chain hotels on the way out and back, places on the interstates or in larger cities that we could reliably predict would be open and provide for our needs. After leaving Jackson Hole, we went back into town (Jackson) for lunch, finding a city park with shaded tables and away from the sounds and smells of the downtown traffic. I visited Jackson, WY for the first time in 1984 and since then it has grown exponentially, to the point it is no longer a nice, quaint town but now a typical tourist trap with all the expected fast-food restaurants and T-shirt shops. Wyoming's loss.

So, after lunch we packed up and headed out for Idaho. When off the beaten path, however, we tried to utilize more colorful and “funky” places, within reason. Case in point was the themed-room lodging in Big Fork. Our destination was the Teton Tepee hotel/motel located outside of Driggs, ID. Driggs is a farming/ranching community of surprising size that boasts a good-size airport with private jet traffic, why I don’t know. The Teton Tepee is a 70’s-era ski lodge, the main focal point being the central gathering spot in the shape of a Tepee, with all the rooms opening onto it and radiating out like spokes of a wagon wheel. The rooms were small but adequate, and the central lodge comfortable and quiet, just the place for reading or napping in one of the stuffed chairs or couches. After getting settled we went back to Driggs for dinner, and ate at the Warbirds Cafe, one of the places recommended by all the locals we spoke to. While we were eating, not one but two private jets landed, taxiing right by our table. After a delicious meal we were offered a tour of the adjoining museum which housed, among other planes, an SNJ, a N3N biplane, an FJ4 Fury, and a MiG-15. While small, it was immaculate and interesting. Who knew?

While in the area, Jerry and I drove up from our lodging to Grand Targhee ski resort, which is actually in Wyoming but on the back side of the Tetons. They had just finished a mountain bike race but we were able to get a couple of trail maps for the 2020 ski season which was curtailed by the pandemic, of course. The next morning, our Tepee hosts provided us a nice breakfast featuring fresh fruit and cornbread blueberry muffins, after which we packed up to head further west for a relatively unknown destination.

The main reason we crossed over into Idaho was to visit Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve. This is a unique park that I visited with a friend back in the 90’s and wanted my wife and traveling companions to see, so we had put it into the itinerary. The nearest town is Arco, which houses the first operational nuclear reactor, but the museum was closed when we went by on the way to the park. Craters of the Moon is a vast lava field and looks like it just solidified yesterday, with jagged spikes of lava poking up everywhere, and lava tubes that are normally open for inspection but unfortunately closed last year due to COVID. For once the crowd was manageable with only a few dozen folks competing for the trails and signage. We had a long day to travel so only spent about four hours there.



Craters of the Moon N.M.



Warbirds Cafe in Driggs, ID. Snoopy standing guard.



Teton Tepee lodge outside Driggs, ID (actually in Wyoming)

Our planned stop for the evening was Pinedale, WY, but on the way, we followed the Snake River from ID into WY and experienced some beautiful fall color. My phone camera could not do it justice as the colors were rich and vibrant with brilliant reds to contrast with the yellow and gold of the Aspen.



Our stay in Pinedale provided our last opportunity for a stay in a “colorful” lodge, and this one harked back to the early days of highway travel in America, as we stayed in a genuine “motor lodge” as they were once called. We now just refer to them as motels. The quirky place was called the Log Cabin Motel, as each unit was just that. Originally built in the 1920s, and now on the Historic Register, the motel was VERY rustic but at the same time comfortable and provided us with kitchenettes and clean but very old accommodations. The owner’s wife was German and very interesting to converse with. The visit in Pinedale was all too brief and then it was back to interstate travel with stops in Sidney, NE (HQ city for Cabela’s), Manhattan, KS (another university town) and finally Conway, AR before reaching Sweet Home Alabama. Strangely enough, our best meal was in Conway where Mike, the owner of Mike’s Place provided us with entertaining dinner conversation and a wonderful meal.

So, 6,198 miles in the Cayenne, two couples who were still cordial with one another afterward, and a ton of memories are the sum total of this road trip.